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Pennsylvania's Bobwhite Quail

WHISTLIN' ROBERT

By NED SMITH

1. How heavy is an average bobwhite?
2. Where do quail build their nests?
3. What is the most conspicuous difference between the plumages of the male and female?
4. What is a flock of quail called?
5. Quail hold well for pointing dogs. True or false?
6. How long after hatching do the young leave the nest?
7. Would a dozen eggs constitute an exceptionally large clutch of eggs?
8. Does the male bobwhite assume any responsibility in the care of the young?

"BOBWHITE!" What sound can warm the heart of an outdoorsman like the call of a quail on a blossom-fragrant May morning. Though the fence post from which he sings is two fields and an orchard away, the notes come through loud and clear, little diminished by distance. You needn't be an ornithologist to identify the vocalist—Bob White speaks his name so distinctly that even folks who wouldn't know him from a Plymouth Rock immediately recognize the song as his.

He makes a handsome picture perched there on his favorite vine-trimmed post—a bit on the plump side, perhaps, but impeccably attired. The most striking feature of his plumage is the dazzling whiteness of his head and throat, boldly divided by a black-trimmed brown ear and neck patch. His expressive crest is raised and lowered with each change in attitude or emotion. From the back he appears chiefly chestnut brown in color, mottled and barred with gray, buff, and black, and graying noticeably toward the tail. His underparts are basically white washed with bright rust or pinkish-brown, deepest just beneath the white bib. The sides are conspicuously streaked with orange-brown and the underparts in general are finely barred with black.

His mate is somewhat duller, but the most noticeable difference is the yellowish-buff color of her face and throat which replaces the male's immaculate white.

Bob and his mate were only recently part of a large covey. All winter long they and about two dozen other quail lived together as amicably as the proverbial "birds of a feather," eating, sleeping, traveling, shivering, and going hungry together. But as the days

lengthened and the temperatures moderated the influence of the coming mating season made itself felt. The usually unassuming males suddenly took to showing off for the hens. Bowing low, elevating their fanned-out tails and spreading their drooping wings they scampered and rushed around any female that looked the least bit impressionable. Competition for attention led to fights, and not infrequently Bob was forced to drive away other cocks with designs on the hen of *his* choice.

Coveys Split Into Pairs

But now in early May the covey has split up into mated pairs that are interested only in building nests and rearing young. Bob spends much of the day on his singing perch and, although we'd like to think he is singing for *our* enjoyment, the fact is he's merely notifying other cock quail that this particular piece of real estate is his and warning them to stay out.

He'll probably not experience any intrusion, however, for by this time most of the bobwhites in the vicinity are paired and established in their own bailiwick. Nest sites will have been chosen, probably in high grass along a fence row, roadside, or stream bank, or possibly in a field of alfalfa or timothy and clover. To make her nest the female merely scratches a depression in the ground and lines it with soft dead grass. She often arches it over with grasses so as to partially conceal her as she incubates.

Quail hens are prolific layers. A complete clutch might consist of from ten to twenty or more top-shaped, pure white eggs, laid at the rate of nearly one a day.

Incubating birds are almost impossible to discover unless they flush, but skunks, opossums, raccoons, and black snakes are often led to the nest by scent or blundering good fortune. The prize is a clutch of eggs and sometimes the sitting hen as well.

Hard to Flush

As incubation progresses the sitting bird becomes more and more reluctant to leave the nest, and when forced to do so often flutters along the ground feigning injury in an attempt to lure the intruder from the vicinity.

Although the cock quail is sometimes credited with taking a hand in the incubating duties he would much prefer to perch on a nearby fence post, stone fence, or low tree limb and whistle. In fact, it is during the nesting season that the familiar "bobwhite" call is most frequently heard.

On the twenty-third day of incubation the chicks make their debut. With the "egg tooth" on the end of their bill they make an encircling cut around the large end of the egg and, flipping it open like a hinged lid, the wet, bedraggled little creatures wearily wriggle and squirm free of their calcium prisons. The hopelessly unattractive things need only dry their natal down to become the cutest, fuzziest little chicks imaginable. Scarcely larger than a good-sized fingertip, they are buffy beneath and chestnut brown marked with dusky above. A conspicuous dark streak extends backward from each eye.

Hatch and Run

The chicks can run about as soon as they are dry, and they usually leave the nest the same day they are hatched. Both parents share the responsibility of teaching them to find food, brooding them at night and during inclem-

ent weather, and coping with any enemies that might appear. The young soon learn to squat motionless at a danger signal from the adult, and so well do these protectively colored little mites blend with their surroundings that it is virtually impossible to find them. In the meantime the old birds either rush at the intruder, fuss anxiously from nearby concealment, or try to entice him away with the old broken wing act, depending on the nature of the threat and their own resourcefulness.

Quail chicks are probably more vulnerable to adverse weather and predation than any other young game birds. Cold, wet weather often takes a heavy toll of small chicks, while foxes, weasels, certain hawks, and stray cats are their most serious predators.

Can Fly in Two Weeks

Fortunately, baby quail develop rapidly. At two weeks of age they can fly short distances and in a few more weeks they can buzz from the ground like their parents. Four-month-old birds closely resemble the adults, and by hunting season are nearly identical in plumage and size (adults average about seven ounces in weight). Hunters can identify the birds of the year in their bag by the pale tips on their outer primary coverts; the same feathers on older birds are plain gray.

In the fall it is not unusual for several families of bobwhites to join forces, forming coveys of thirty or more individuals. They pass the autumn and winter in these harmonious groups, dispersing only when mating begins in the spring.

Although early summer is the crucial time for young quail, winter is a greater threat to the survival of adults. Food can be hard enough to find in satisfactory amounts when the ground is bare, but when deep drifts cover everything—occasionally including the roosting birds themselves—things can really be tough. And if those deep snows become crusted for any length of time quail are going to have a rough time of it. Deep snows also engulf much of the life-saving cover and provide a white background against which it is impossible for a covey of bobwhites to hide from predators. Such inhospitable conditions have been known to nearly wipe out the bobwhite population, as happened in Pennsylvania during the disastrous winter of 1935-36 and again in 1944-45. Research studies by the Pennsylvania Game Commission reveal that the most effective means of combatting these winter losses is the establishment of first rate cover plants that also provide a measure of winter food. Japanese honeysuckle seems to be the most promising plant for the purpose, with osage orange and common greenbrier also recommended.

Throughout the rest of the year food isn't much of a problem for Bob White and his kin. Young greens are avidly consumed in early spring until insects appear in appreciable numbers. From then until autumn insects, berries, small wild fruits, and green plants form the bulk of the quail's diet. Autumn foods consist primarily of weed seeds, dried fruits, and waste grain. Because of the huge numbers of destructive insects and noxious weed seeds consumed the bobwhite is considered a valuable bird to have around the place—a fact of which most farmers are well aware.

Bobwhites have interesting and amusing ways. They love to dust, and

in dry summer weather often resort to favorite dusting spots in dirt roads, along field edges, or other places where dry soil is exposed. Flushed from their hiding places after their dust baths they appear to explode from the ground in a puff of smoke!

The covey roosts in a unique circular formation on the ground, tails together and heads outward, radiating from the center like the spokes of a wheel. Unexpectedly stepping into one such explosive huddle is enough to wreck the nerves and marksmanship of the best shotgun artist.

Quail have quite a vocabulary. When undisturbed at their feeding they converse at a great rate in subdued tones that suggest they might be talking to themselves, rather than to one another. Disturb them in heavy cover, and you may hear one or more complaining about the intrusion before bursting into flight. A single bird separated from the covey will call "Purr-leer; purr-leer" until the rest of the gang is located and rejoined. And of course, every bobwhite worthy of the name can whistle his own name.

Hunters are enthusiastic about the bobwhite, but owners of pointing dogs are particularly impressed with his sporting qualities. He lies well to the point—indeed, he and the woodcock are the only game birds in Pennsylvania that can be depended upon to do so. This characteristic makes him an excellent bird on which to train a young pointer, setter, or Brittany.

On the table, he is a gastronomic delight. I never cease to marvel at the ease with which a brace of quail on toast can make converts of folks who "don't care for game." A sad end for so noble a bird? Not when held to reasonable limits, I contend. It makes more sense to me to harvest some birds from large, healthy coveys in hunting season than to commit the surplus to death by exposure, lack of food, or predation during the advancing winter. They're too good to waste—and pass the paprika, please.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

1. **Approximately seven ounces.**
2. **On the ground.**
3. **The head and throat of the male are white, the female yellowish-buff.**
4. **A covey or bevy.**
5. **True.**
6. **Usually as soon as they dry off.**
7. **No, they often number many more.**
8. **Yes, he shares such responsibility equally with the female.**

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